

Using Specially Designed Curricular

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Materials in Various Educational Settings  
for Visually Handicapped Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to respond to the questions of educators of visually handicapped children regarding the use of specially designed curricular materials in the various educational settings in which these children are enrolled. In responding to these questions, the article uses Patterns: The Primary Braille Reading Program as an example of specially designed curricular materials. Within this context, specific guidelines are given for using Patterns in both self-contained and mainstreamed classes. In addition, some emphasis is given to describing the roles of the regular classroom teacher and the specially trained teacher of the visually handicapped in teaching reading to students who use braille as their reading medium.

Using Specially Designed Curricular  
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The development of educational programs for visually handicapped children in the United States has not progressed without controversy. Historically, this development spans many years, beginning with the establishment of Perkins School for the Blind in 1829, continuing through the establishment of a variety of programs in public and private day schools throughout the country, and culminating in the passage and implementation of Public Law 94-142 which requires all Local Education Agencies to provide for the education of handicapped children. These changes ultimately resulted in a rather dramatic shift in the educational placement of visually handicapped children from residential schools to day schools.

As the emphasis in school placement changed from the residential school program to the day school program, a controversy arose between educators who felt that the educational needs of visually handicapped children could be met better in residential school programs and those who felt that day school programs could meet these needs more effectively. Fortunately, this controversy has subsided over the years as cooperation between residential schools and day schools has increased and as the roles of both

types of programs have changed. Unfortunately, the controversy is still somewhat apparent in relation to the selection and use of curricular materials for visually handicapped children. Today, some educators feel that visually handicapped children should have no specially designed materials. They believe, instead, that curricular materials used by sighted children in the regular classroom should be adapted and used by visually handicapped children. Others believe that some specially designed materials are needed, but that the curricular materials used in the regular classroom by sighted children should be adapted and used to the greatest extent possible. Still others feel that only specially designed materials should be used.

Because of these differing opinions about the selection and use of curricular materials for visually handicapped children, the development of special materials has been questioned. This is particularly true of materials which might require that visually handicapped children be removed from the "mainstream" for any part of their school day. For example, when a primary braille reading program entitled Patterns: The Primary Braille Reading Program (Caton, Pester, and Bradley, 1980-83) was developed at the American Printing House for the Blind, questions were raised about its use in certain types of day school programs, especially in itinerant and resource room programs.

In order to provide answers for some of these questions, this article will focus on two points: (1) an explanation of the major purpose of the Patterns program and (2) the provision of specific guidelines for using it in a variety of educational programs. In addition, some emphasis is given to describing the roles of the regular classroom teacher and the specially trained teacher of the visually handicapped in teaching braille reading.

The Patterns primary braille reading program is unique in that it is a comprehensive beginning reading program designed exclusively for use by children who will use braille as their reading medium. The unique features of this program are described in detail in articles by Caton (1979) and Caton and Bradley (1979). These articles emphasize the aspects of the braille code and of the learning characteristics of blind children which were considered in the development of the program. These are, of course, extremely important considerations, and they are reflected in the major purpose of Patterns which is to provide blind children with a reading program based on the code they will use in reading--braille.

It is important, however, to place this major purpose and the Patterns program itself into perspective in relation to its use in the various types of school settings in which visually handicapped children are most often enrolled. As the general introduction to the program states, Patterns was designed to be used by blind



children in a variety of educational settings. These settings are:

(a) those in which blind children are enrolled in regular classes for sighted children and also receive services from an itinerant teacher (b) those in which blind children are enrolled in regular classes for sighted children and also receive services from a resource room teacher in the same school, and (c) those in which blind children are enrolled in special schools for the visually handicapped (i.e., residential schools, special day schools).

As stated, the major purpose of this article is to provide suggestions, or guidelines, for using the Patterns programs in these settings. Before this is done, however, the authors wish to emphasize very strongly several basic tenets upon which the guidelines will be based:

1. All visually handicapped children should be educated in the "least restrictive environment" as required by Public Law 94-142. However, this does not mean that either blind or low vision students should necessarily be "mainstreamed" into a regular classroom for all reading instruction. In fact, the regular classroom might be the "most restrictive" environment for some of these children.

2. All blind students who are beginning to learn to read should receive their basic instruction from a specially trained teacher of visually handicapped children who knows the braille code and who knows how to teach reading to children who use this code as their reading medium.

3. The braille code differs significantly from the print code. Therefore, methods and materials for teaching reading to children who use braille as their reading medium should differ significantly from methods and materials used to teach children who use print as their reading medium.

4. Blind children who will use braille as their reading medium should be taught to read with a program which is based on the code they will use (braille) and not with programs based on a code they will never use (print).

The Patterns program was designed with these tenets in mind. The Teacher's Editions provide detailed instructions on teaching braille reading and indicate sections which can only be taught by those who know braille. The sequence of the introduction of vocabulary and reading skills is based on the order of difficulty of the braille code. Teaching methods are based on the unique characteristics of the braille code (i.e., positions of contractions in words, etc.). Story content reflects the interests and characteristics of blind children. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that Patterns is an appropriate program for children who use braille as their reading medium. This does not mean, however, that other reading programs and materials cannot be used in conjunction with the Patterns program. In fact, one of the purposes of the guidelines which follow is to point out ways in which the use

of other reading materials with Patterns can make it a more effective program.

The two basic types of educational settings for visually handicapped children in the United States today are mainstreamed settings and self-contained settings. There are several kinds of class organizational plans which may be used in each of these settings, and visually handicapped children should be placed in the setting which best meets their individual needs. As a result, some visually handicapped children may be receiving reading instruction in classes where only visually handicapped children are enrolled, while others may receive instruction in classes with normally sighted children.

Procedures for utilizing the Patterns program effectively in these settings follow. Included are ideas for using other reading programs in conjunction with Patterns.

#### Patterns in Self-Contained Classes

For purposes of the discussion, self-contained programs are defined as those in which the students receive instruction in classes in which only visually handicapped children are enrolled. These classes may be in a residential school for the visually handicapped, in a special day school for the visually handicapped, or in a regular elementary school. The following guidelines will apply to any of these settings.



As a general rule, teachers in the classes described are specially trained teachers of the visually handicapped. They know the braille code and how to teach reading to children who use it. Also, these teachers are responsible for all teaching of beginning reading to children in their classes. Since Patterns is a basic reading program specifically designed for braille readers, it lends itself very well to use in these classes particularly when braille readers receive reading instruction in separate groups. No additional suggestions are needed when Patterns is used in this way since the Teacher's Editions are self-explanatory and directions for the use of student materials are clear.

In some self-contained classes, however, both braille readers and low vision print readers receive their reading instruction in the same group. While the authors do not feel that this is the most desirable method of teaching reading to either braille or print readers, there are ways in which the Patterns program can be used effectively in such a mixed group. Some specific guidelines are:

1. Do not attempt to teach basic skills and vocabulary which are unique to the braille code to a combined group of braille and print readers. To attempt to do so is counterproductive since print readers have to sit and wait while the braille code is being discussed and braille readers have to sit and wait while pictures, visual concepts, etc. are being discussed. However, when children

are engaged in oral reading activities and oral discussion of stories, both braille and print readers can be a part of the same group.

2. The majority of the basal reading programs used by print readers are available in braille and even if braille readers use Patterns as their basic program, they can read stories from these programs used by print readers and enter into the discussions. (The students using Patterns may not be familiar with all the vocabulary in other programs, but they will benefit from the experience of reading a variety of materials.)

3. Braille and print readers can also be a part of the same group when braille readers read aloud from Patterns. Braille readers can read the stories aloud and the teacher can ask the entire group the questions provided in the Teacher's Edition. This gives the braille readers practice in oral reading and helps to develop listening skills for all students.

4. The lessons in the Patterns program are extensive and teach many skills which are needed by both braille and print readers. Teachers can study the lesson plans and select parts which can be taught to both types of readers in the same group (i.e., concept development, oral language skills, phonological activities, etc.).

5. In instances where basic reading skills and vocabulary must be taught to print readers separately, braille readers can work

independently on worksheets which accompany the Patterns program. Also, print readers can be assigned independent tasks while the teacher instructs the braille readers separately.

In summary then, the Patterns program can be used very effectively in self-contained programs for visually handicapped children. This is true even in classes in which braille readers and low vision, print readers receive reading instruction in the same group. Skills which are unique to braille readers must be taught to them in separate groups, and skills which are unique to print readers must be taught to them separately. However, some parts of the lessons in Patterns and in other reading programs may be taught to combined groups of braille and print readers.

#### Patterns in Mainstreamed Classes

The term "mainstreamed class" is used here to describe regular day school classes in which visually handicapped and normally sighted children receive at least part of their academic instruction in that classroom. The most widely used organizational plans for these classes are the resource room plan and the itinerant teacher plan. Therefore, the suggestions for using Patterns in mainstreamed classes will focus on these two plans.

Since both print and braille readers often receive instruction together in these classes, the guidelines given for self-contained classes may apply to them also. For this reason,

some of these guidelines are repeated in the sections which follow and teachers of these types of classes may wish to review them when they are using the Patterns program.

Some guidelines are unique to mainstreamed classes, however. They are unique because they are primarily related to the amount of direct instruction the students receive from the special teacher of the visually handicapped and how much they receive from the regular classroom teacher. As stated earlier, the authors believe that the special teacher of the visually handicapped must be responsible for the initial teaching of basic reading skills which are unique to the braille code. Because these skills play such an important part in the young braille reader's total school program, it is necessary for the special teacher, whether resource room or itinerant, to be available to the child for braille reading instruction every day. In addition, the special teacher must be available to support and assist the regular classroom teacher who is working with braille readers in classes with sighted children.

The guidelines which follow emphasize ways in which the regular classroom teacher and the teacher of the visually handicapped can work together in using Patterns more effectively in the regular classroom. Some specific guidelines are:

1. In most primary grade classrooms, teachers have more than one reading group and often use more than one basic reading program.



Because Patterns is a complete and basic reading program, a braille reader can work with the special teacher of the visually handicapped on Patterns while the other children are reading in their groups without greatly disturbing the usual daily routine of the class.

2. Patterns contains much material that the special teacher of the visually handicapped can assign for the braille reader to complete independently in the regular classroom. As an example, there are two kinds of worksheets: skill introduction sheets and practice sheets. A student can work on practice sheets in the regular classroom while others in the room are in the reading circle or completing workbook pages. Because each Patterns Teacher's Edition has facsimilies of these worksheets in print, the classroom teacher can check progress. The special teacher of the visually handicapped will need to provide the appropriate Teacher's Edition for the classroom teacher.

3. If the special teacher of the visually handicapped is an itinerant teacher, he/she can work with a teacher aide in providing reading instruction for students who are braille readers. The itinerant teacher can go over the lessons with the teacher aide and provide instructions which can be followed when the itinerant teacher is not in the school building. If this practice is followed, great care should be taken in training the teacher aide to work with the students.



4. When children are reading aloud from other basic reading books, children who read either braille or print can be a part of the group if a braille copy of the other reader is available. Even though students using Patterns as their basic program may not know all the vocabulary in other programs, they will benefit from the experience of reading a variety of materials. The vocabulary difficulty can be handled from primer level on with the help of the special teacher of the visually handicapped. The classroom teacher will supply the special teacher of the visually handicapped with a lesson-by-lesson vocabulary list. It is likely that most of the new words in a given lesson will be known or decodable words to the child reading Patterns. The special teacher can introduce the few remaining words when he or she meets with the child.

5. To help the visually handicapped child become more a part of the group, and to help the others accept the child more readily, it is important for the classroom teacher to ask the child studying Patterns to read aloud a Patterns selection from time to time. The teacher can then use the comprehension questions suggested in the Patterns Teacher's Edition to check the listening skills of all the students.

6. Many sections of the lessons in Patterns can be used with both print and braille readers. For example, sections on concept development and listening are equally important for both print and

braille students.

7. Patterns can be used to supplement the work in another basic reading program. If the braille readers receive their basic reading instruction in another reading program, worksheets and other parts of the Patterns program can be used as a supplement to that program to teach braille readers basic skills and vocabulary unique to the braille code. These Patterns materials can be introduced by the special teacher and then completed by the braille readers. This might be done while the print readers are practicing writing or doing something else which would not include braille readers.

8. Because teachers know that reading fluency increases with reading, most classroom teachers have a library corner in the classroom for free time use and/or a library time set aside in the school library for their classes. The Patterns Library Series (1982-1984), provides this kind of reading for the visually handicapped child. The addition of some of the same titles in print to the classroom library will also further the integration of the braille reading child into the group.

In summary then, the Patterns program can be used very effectively in mainstreamed classes in which visually impaired children receive at least part of their academic instruction in classes with students who are not visually handicapped. Even so, a special teacher of the visually handicapped with a limited amount of

direct teaching time must be responsible for teaching the blind child basic reading skills which are unique to the braille code. There are some parts of the Patterns program which the blind child can work on or share with the students in the mainstreamed classroom and some parts which can be used effectively with both print and braille readers together. There are also meaningful ways to use other reading programs effectively with Patterns.

### Summary

The Patterns program can be used very effectively with braille readers in a variety of programs, both mainstreamed and self-contained. It is a reading program based on the braille code and is designed to meet the needs of young children who use braille as their reading medium.

Regardless of the kind of a program the braille readers are in, they should be taught reading skills and vocabulary unique to the braille code by specially trained teachers, individually or in groups which do not include print readers.

Because Patterns is a comprehensive basic reading program, it can be used with young braille readers as their only reading program. It can also be used as a supplemental program when braille readers are using another basic reading program.

Patterns can also be used with both print and braille readers in the same class. Guidelines in this article for doing this include using the following: (a) practice sheets from Patterns, (b) oral reading in other basic readers, (c) oral reading from Patterns that can be done with the whole class, and (d) activities and worksheets on basic skills and vocabulary unique to the braille code from Patterns to supplement another basic reading program.

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